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ABSTRACT

The prominence of agenda items, the attendant controversy, and changes proposed in 5 areas of education reform were studied in 33 urban school districts during 1992 to 1995. Only a tiny fraction of the study of American politics has focused on school boards, their attendant bureaucracies, and the local political issues involved. This paper explored the school reform agenda of the early 1990s, asking what types of change were most prevalent, and whether issues forced each other off local agenda or bundled into cohesive education agenda. Whether variation in school reform efforts has been caused by community demands was also considered. The findings imply that education reforms have fared unevenly, with those that affect students directly being relatively more controversial and more subject to inter-district variation than those dealing with internal system affairs. School agendas proved to be much more elastic in capacity than those of electorates or national legislatures, in that issues tended to be considered en masse when they received attention. It also was shown that education reform was not accelerated by local dissatisfaction with schools, a finding that leaves open the question of what does explain reform efforts. This study is the first effort of what will eventually be a study of 57 urban districts. (Contains 8 figures, 7 tables, and 54 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Agendas, Activity, and Education Reform: Policy Diffusion and Controversy in Urban School Districts, 1992-1995

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ABSTRACT

The agenda prominence, attendant controversy, and changes proposed for five areas of education reform are studied in 33 urban school districts during the 1992-95 period. School governance is the iceberg of American political science, as the study of these 15,000 American governments represents only a tiny fraction of the work done on American politics. If, as House Speaker Tip O'Neill used to say, "All politics is local," then much of American politics is transpiring unexamined as school boards and their attendant bureaucracies go about their daily business. This paper explores what the school reform agenda looked like in the early 1990s: Which types of change were most prevalent? Do issues force each other off the local agenda, as in partisan national politics, or do they bundle into a cohesive education agenda? The paper then asks: Is variation in school reform efforts caused by some communities demanding that inadequate schools be improved? The findings imply that education reforms have fared unevenly, with those that affect students directly being relatively more controversial and more subject to inter-district variation than those dealing with internal system affairs. School agendas are much more elastic in capacity than those of electorates or national legislatures, as issues tend to be considered en masse when they receive attention. And most importantly, education reform is not accelerated by local dissatisfaction with schools, which leaves open the question of what does explain reform efforts. This paper represents the first cut at a data set that will eventually include policy and contextual data on 57 urban districts.

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The Politics of School Reform

Education reform has periodically enjoyed a prominent place upon the American agenda at least since Horace Mann became state Secretary of Education and led the charge to reform Massachusetts schooling in the 1830s. Waves of education reform have regularly crashed upon the schools and then dissipated, leaving little record of what-- if anything-- has changed.[1] Because school policy is managed by 15,000 independent school districts, which operate with varied degrees of formality and efficiency, there is no coherent record of what policies have been tried, where they have been proposed, and how they have fared. This study examines how five professionally advocated systemic reforms fared in major American school districts during the 1992-95 period.

School governance is the iceberg of American political science. Students of national politics have traditionally shifted to studying the 50 state governments to when seeking to increase the number of observations available for analysis (Fiorina 1992). The 15,000 independent school governments in the U.S. outnumber state governments by a factor of 300. Nonetheless, this mass of American governments is represented in only a tiny fraction of the work done on American politics. If, as House Speaker Tip O'Neill used to say, "All politics is local," then much of American politics is transpiring unexamined as school boards and their attendant bureaucracies go about their daily business. School boards, like all other independent governments, consist of local politicians seeking re-election, good public policy, and internal power and influence (Fenno, 1973). The board's institutional configuration varies, as board members are generally elected, either by ward or at-large, but are appointed in some cities. These pols must grapple with competing constituencies, limited resources, public opinion, bureaucracies, and political cultures. Political scientists are familiar at the national and state level with legislative phenomena like log rolling, limited agendas, Presidential mid term losses, case work, lobbying, PACs, media campaigns, war chests, and committee government. How much do these phenomena characterize the more amateur and less partisan politics of local school legislation? And, if they are less ubiquitous, do other phenomena appear in their place?

This paper is a first cut at examining policy making in 33 mostly urban school boards. It is part of an ongoing larger project, in which data on agenda prominence, policy activity, constituency involvement, board structures and behaviors, and environmental variables are being collected for 57 school districts.

What is known about education policy is largely the product of case study and anecdote. Systematic data has been collected at the state level (Odden 1991), but rarely at the district level.[2] This failing denies political science a valuable opportunity to test the general validity

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[1] One Chamber of Commerce official attributed some of the nation's educational difficulties to a public perception of school system stagnation. He said, "The biggest challenge that the superintendent has is increasing the public's involvement in the schools. That may be true of any school district because I think most people have a perception of public schools as so broken down that they can't be fixed. It provides a built-in excuse not to spend the time."

[2] The largest district-level studies have rarely looked at more than a dozen districts. Some of the major studies include Gittell & Hollander's 1968 study of six cities, Crain's 1968 study

many pet hypotheses. The narrowly tailored authority of school districts, the amateurism of the school district policy process, the immense reliance upon teachers for effective operation, and the nonpartisan environment (Figure 1) permit agenda formation and activity to be studied under unfamiliar constraints. Nonpartisanship makes it likely that school districts will be marked by inaction, as the lack of party leadership or collective responsibility permits policy makers are able to shirk responsibility and avoid taking actions which might offend (Fiorina 1992; Key 1950; Schattschneider 1942). Previous work has shown that issues systematically rise or fall in prominence and legislative attention (Kingdon 1984). Do certain issues regularly hold more prominent agenda positions across the nation's school districts, despite the discrete and independent status of these governments? Do school agendas fill up in the same way that national agendas do (Light, 1991)? Especially since voters have first-hand experience with their local schools, do communities dissatisfied with their schools force those systems to produce reform in the same way dissatisfied national electorates seem to? (Brady 1988; Burnham 1970; Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Key 1950).[3]

Figure 1 About Here

Methodology

Data were collected on 33 school districts.[4] The 33 are a random sample of the 51 city Permanent Community Sample (PCS)[5] that Terry Clark created in 1969, supplemented by the nation's 12 biggest cities that Clark excluded from that stratified sample.[6] Because school

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on desegregation in 15 cities, and the Rand Corporation's 1989 study of reform in six cities. Some studies have looked at more cities, but they have generally relied upon less reliable data-collection (Zeigler et al 1985) and have not focused on the policy making process or policy outcomes (First and Walberg 1992; IEL 1986; McDonnell and Pascal 1979; The Twentieth Century Fund 1992; Wirt and Kirst 1972; Zeigler et al 1974).

[3] By studying school policy change, the author is not equating reform with "improvement", as some previous researchers have done (Gittell and Hollander, 1968).

[4] There are 18 Northern and 15 Sun Belt districts. The districts are all located in cities of 50,000 or more, but they range from the heavily urban (i.e. Philadelphia, Milwaukee) to the more suburban (i.e. Palo Alto, CA; Warren, MI).

[5] The sample is no longer a perfectly stratified sample of U.S. cities, because city sizes have changed since 1969. However, using the PCS will enable research to compare the data collected with the immense data that has been assembled on the PCS cities since 1969.

[6] Two of the 12 additional cities were excluded. New York and Chicago have both adopted governance structures that are unique in among the districts studied and that largely eliminate district-wide policy making. New York has 32 community school boards, the result of a 1969 reorganization (Katznelson, 1981). Chicago has adopted a radical version of site-based

districts do not always conform to city limits, the school district that most closely conformed to the city limits was used. In cities where districts were extremely fragmented, the district named after the city was used.

A series of 145 structured phone interviews conducted by the author between February and June, 1995, produced the data.[7] Interviews ranged in length from 17 to 54 minutes, with a mean of about 36 minutes. Interviewed in each city were: the reporter on the largest circulation local newspaper who covers the local public schools; the president of the teachers' union; a senior school system administrator (suggested by the reporter); the President or an assigned representative of the Chamber of Commerce, or the most locally influential business organization (as indicated by the reporter); and the director of the most influential local minority organization (as indicated by the reporter).[8] All five respondents were interviewed in 13 cities, and four of the five in the other 20 cities. Using the community survey approach,[9] questions treated respondents as informed sources on local school policy, rather than as objects of interest in their own right.[10]

District responses were produced by averaging all responses provided by all local respondents (excluding those who answered "don't know").[11] When creating dummy variables for whether proposals were made and enacted, districts were coded "yes" if more than 50% of respondents answered "yes", and "no" otherwise.

This is a study of district-level school policy making. Consequently, decentralized districts that permit a great deal of policy making on a school-level basis will not be coded as

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management (Hess, 1991), which has essentially created 500+ school boards. Of the remaining ten cities, six were randomly selected for inclusion.

[7] The data here represents slightly under half of the data set that will be collected. The full data set will include five or six interviews in each of 57 cities.

[8] Only 3 of the 148 respondents contacted as of June had refused to participate. Several other sources contacted had referred the caller to another source in the organization. For example, some suggested administrators suggested interviewing the superintendent. Frequently, Chamber and minority organization leaders referred the caller to a Vice President or deputy who made it a point to closely follow school affairs. In these cases, the author would contact and interview the suggested respondent.

[9] Pioneered by Terry Clark (1968) and Robert Crain (1969), among others.

[10] Obviously there is degree of subjectivity and misinformation in this process (Fowler and Mangione 1990; Krosnick and Berent 1993; Schuman and Presser 1981), but a review of alternatives to the research design convinced the author to use this methodology and question design.

[11] At this preliminary stage, no missing data models have been used to adjust composites for the 20 incomplete cities or to account for missing data. No respondent refused to answer any of the questions examined here, so all "don't knows" were just that.

having changed policy unless changes were credited to a district-wide initiative.[12] On the other hand, state actions that entailed school district policy changes were coded "yes". In this paper, controls for state activity have not been included, so districts forced to act by the state are coded the same as districts that willingly changed policy. This coding was chosen for two reasons. One, the opinion as to what is a state mandate is somewhat ambiguous. Second, because state action may make other district activity unnecessary or unfeasible, discounting state-required activity introduces other problems. Consequently, for now, state-ordered policy change is treated like locally-directed change.

The Two Cores: Schools as Organizations

Collecting data on five different types of education reform has made it possible to examine inter-issue differences in visibility, attendant controversy, and policy activity. The five areas of reform studied are: the school day or calendar, curriculum, student evaluation, the professional development of teachers, and decentralizing central office control of school sites (instituting site-based management, or SBM). These issues, covering the gamut of school functions, are the key school reforms that have been touted by professional educators and education professors in the early 1990s.[13] They vary greatly in how closely they touch students, how much they affect classroom activity, and in the expense they incur. Curriculum and student assessment touch students and their families very directly. Professional development and teacher evaluation is of more concern to teachers and school system administrators, as is the issue of decentralizing the control of schools. Changes in the school day or calendar are more of a housekeeping issue, but one that, like site-based management, shapes schooling practice. Changes in school time, testing, and professional development are generally expensive, while SBM and curricular changes can be done cheaply if the district skimps on training.

The education reform agenda, then, is a series of proposals to revise school practice and organization. Consequently, before examining the policies, it may help to briefly consider

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[12] Some researchers (Crain et al 1969; Monkkenen 1981) have done interesting analyses of policy diffusion based on the chronology of policy adoption across cities. This approach is problematic here. One, it is ambiguous as to when policies are actually changed as districts appear to change policy gradually, through informal directives rather than formal votes. Also, many new programs are piloted, so that the date of official policy change and actual implementation differ greatly. Second, even system insiders have only a general sense of when policy was changed. Given the narrow time period being examined, these concerns make chronological analysis unproductive at this time.

[13] These issues were selected based on their inclusion in a six-part series Education Week compiled in 1993 (Vol. 12, Nos. 22-26, February 24 - March 24) on the leading contemporary school reforms. The series examined the five issue areas examined here, and the more amorphous issue of involving the community in schools. Given Education Week's status as the journal of record in the professional education community, this represents a fair view of the five school reforms most heralded by school reformers in the early 1990s.

schools as organizations. Traditionally, schools have been viewed as classic "loosely coupled systems", which are resistant to centralized control (Weick 1976, Powell and DiMaggio 1991). That analysis needs to be supplemented by conceptually distinguishing the two constituencies which populate schools: professional educators and students. These two groups have very different interests. Students are a product; a walking, talking product. Naturally, the student, the student's family, and the community are primarily concerned with value added to the product-- what the student learns and how well he learns it. *How* a quality education is delivered is secondary.

On the other hand, the educator's organizational position encourages the teacher to pay primary attention to issues other than student outcomes. The quality of a teacher's day-to-day professional life is largely determined by how he is treated within the school (Elmore 1991; Powell et al 1985). The quantity of demands placed on teachers, their status as professionals, and their independence in the school structure are all likely to have more effect upon a teacher's job satisfaction than are issues of how students are taught and tested. Issues of teacher professionalism and independence may be linked to issues of teaching and learning, but there is no necessary correlation.

This distinction implies school organizations bifurcated into two "technical cores". The idea of a technical core is that organizations' seek to buffer their central function, or "technical core", from environmental chaos in order to regularize the lives of organization members. (Thompson 1967; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Organizations buffer the core by insulating it from the external world. Schools are unusual because core activities directly affect two constituencies with two sets of interests.

It is likely that school organizations will have an easier time insulating the teacher-oriented core than the student-oriented core. Parents and the community are primarily concerned with the teaching and learning core of curriculum and assessment. Teachers and system personnel will focus more on professional core issues such as school governance, teacher evaluation, and professional development. Consequently, the teaching and learning core ought to be more visible in the community, and it ought to be more controversial. We also expect it to be more susceptible to community involvement and influence than is the professional core.

Agendas and Policy Making

Given this hypothesis, what does education reform actually look like? Which issues have topped the agenda? The two-core hypothesis predicts that it will be the core teaching and learning activities of testing and curriculum.

To gauge agenda prominence, respondents were asked, "Zero to ten, how much public attention has (issue area) received in (the district) during the last three years, where zero means no public attention and ten a great deal of public attention?" The question is designed as a general thermometer, and is obviously vulnerable to a great deal of noise. More precision and objectivity would help, but the majority of respondents, and just about all system outsiders (education reporters, minority organization leaders, Chamber of Commerce leaders), were comfortable with the question and did not seem inclined or able to differentiate any more finely.

The relative size of the standard errors gives a sense of the variability across the issue areas.[14] The results presented Table 1 are the average of the mean responses for the 33 cities.

Table 1: Mean Public Attention and Controversy By Issue Area

	Site-Based Management	Teacher Development	Curriculum	Student Evaluation	School Time/Day
Public Attention	7.15	5.58	6.11	6.16	4.62
	(1.81)	(1.44)	(1.46)	(1.95)	(1.55)
Controversy	4.95	3.72	4.94	5.63	3.43
	(1.78)	(1.57)	(1.72)	(1.82)	(1.77)

Mean rating. Standard deviations are in parentheses.
n = 33.

Surprisingly, site-based management tops the public agenda (Figure 2). With that notable exception, the levels of public attention look much like hypothesized. Evaluation and curriculum are both at about a 6.1 on the scale, while professional development lags slightly and school time lags sigrificantly. Generally, the teaching and learning core issues that directly impact students rated in the upper range of attention, although SBM is dramatically higher than anticipated. This could be because the popularity of decentralizing government generally in the last decade has pushed SBM onto the agenda.

Figure 2 About Here

After being asked about issue attention, respondents were asked, "Zero to ten, how controversial has (issue area) been during the last three years, where zero means not at all controversial and ten very controversial?" How strong is the relationship between issue agenda prominence and conflict? In partisan politics they appear to be highly correlated, but in the less partisan and more professionally dominated world of schooling they may not be.

The relative controversy produced by each issue is shown in the second graph of Figure 2. Means for controversy substantially lagged means for public attention in all issue areas.[15] If this finding is not a wording artifact, it would indicate that local education policy proceeds

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[14] Evaluation has the largest standard deviations, for both attention (1.95) and controversy (1.81). Issues of assessment, which involve judging students, tend to be either very high or very low on the agenda. Professional development has the smallest standard errors, 1,44 for attention and 1.56 for controversy.

[15] This may be an artifact of question wording or question order (the attention question came first), but there were scores of instances where respondents said controversy in an issue area exceeded the public attention.

in a relatively placid atmosphere, which fits with traditional understandings of local school politics as low-pressure and nonpartisan (IEL 1986, Wirt and Kirst 1972; Zeigler et al 1974).[16]

The results on issue controversy are similar to those for attention, but mesh better with the hypothesis that the teaching and learning core will be at the center of the school agenda.[17] Evaluation is the most controversial issue, at 5.63, while SBM (4.95) and curriculum (4.94) lag a half-point behind. Professional development and the school day scored quite low on controversy.

The third graph in Figure 2 shows by how much the attention paid to an issue area exceeds its controversiality. A taller bar represents a less volatile issue area. Here, the results fit quite well with the two-core hypothesis. The issues of curriculum and student evaluation are the most controversial at a given level of attention, while those of concern primarily to teachers and school system insiders are the least controversial at a given level of attention. Conflict is most likely to emerge over issues which directly concern students and their families.

A glance at Figure 3 gives a sense of how much variation there was between attention to issue areas across cities. The professional core was marked by sharply-peaked distributions, as SBM and teacher development showed little variation across districts. On the other hand, there was a good deal of variation in attention paid to evaluation and school time, while curricular reform pretty much approximated a normal curve. As hypothesized, consideration of the professional core appears more stable, meaning it is less vulnerable to environmental pressures than is the student-centered core.

Figure 3 About Here

Attention Is Nice, But Where's the Action?

After the two preceding questions, respondents were asked, "In the last three years, yes or no, has there been a proposal to change policy in (issue area)?"[18] Due to imperfect recall, some respondents answered yes but later dated those changes as pre-1992. However, for this paper, those responses are still coded as yes. Within a city, respondents frequently disagreed

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[16] Notice in Figure 1 how unimportant the major parties are reported to be in school board elections.

[17] Some respondents had a good deal of trouble with this question, as they wanted to distinguish between controversy inside and outside the school system. These respondents tended to be insiders (union presidents and administrators). Respondents were advised to give a weighted average for a response.

[18] This is a very vague formulation which leaves the question of "what does it mean for something to be proposed?" unanswered. However, conducting the project pilot showed that any more precise formulated question caused respondents to skip proposals. They were very comfortable with this question, and only one or two asked for clarification on what it meant for a policy change to be proposed. Respondents generally considered a proposal to be a suggestion which had been generated by the superintendent's office or the state.

as to whether a proposal had been made.[19] Finally, respondents who agreed there had been a proposal often disagreed about the "most significant" change to have been made. Due to these concerns, creating district composites was kept simple. After dropping "don't knows", a district was coded "yes" if a majority of respondents said a policy had been proposed. Otherwise it was coded "no".[20]

As mentioned earlier, questions asked about district-level activity. Respondents would sometimes answer that there had been no district-level policy change in an area, but that school sites had changed policy. This would be coded as "no proposal" unless the respondent indicated that the district had directly created schools generally adopted, or had changed policy by formally moving to decentralized control in the issue area.[21]

Figure 4 About Here

Site-based management and curriculum dominated the policy making process, with more than 80% of cities making proposals in each area (Table 2). Teacher development (61%) and student evaluation (49%) changes were somewhat less pervasive, while proposals changing school time were only made in about a third of districts (Figure 4). Site-based management (28%) and curriculum (27%) make up over 50% of the proposals enacted among the five policy areas (Figure 5).

Figure 5 About Here

By far, the most proposals have been made in those areas which are the cheapest and easiest to change in a district-wide fashion. SBM can be declared and curriculum can be changed without incurring costs, while that is much more difficult in the other three areas. Site-based management can be announced pretty readily, and does not require much in the way of preparation. Curriculum, because it consists of so many discrete pieces, may be changed in multiple ways from the center.

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[19] Five to ten people in each policy area answered that they did not know if a policy had changed.

[20] One virtue of this approach, in addition to its simplicity, is that it mutes the noise produced by random respondents. Districts with a great deal of activity or big changes in an area are likely to be coded "yes" and others to be coded "no".

[21] This tended to be relevant primarily in the issue of time. A number of respondents said that time changes were done on a site-by-site basis. A frequently mentioned professional development change was shifting control of professional development to school sites. Those districts were coded as having made a proposal, since the change represented a formal change of district policy.

Table 2: Rates of Proposals and Enactment by Issue Area

	Site-Based Management	Teacher Development	Curriculum	Student Evaluation	School Day/Time
Percentage of Cities Proposing Change	84%	61%	82%	49%	33%
Percentage of Cities Enacting Change	81%	58%	79%	42%	30%
Percentage of Proposed Policies Enacted	96%	95%	96%	88%	91%

n = 33.

Issues of time and evaluation can also raise public ire, as they change comfortable elements of daily life. Attempts to change the school day or calendar have experienced problems with parents concerned about vacations and leaving children alone after school. Evaluation changes affect promotion, graduation, and how students fare when applying to colleges and jobs.

The foregoing implies that policy makers and administrators may attempt to duck some issues because they are likely to spark controversy. However, the relationship between controversy and proposed policy change is not clear-cut. A positive proposal-controversy association would imply that proposals generate controversy, and a negative association that districts avoid proposing action in volatile areas. The two-core hypothesis predicts that the correlation will be positive in student core because proposals will generate controversy; while that in the professional core will be negative because will change those policies when they can do so in private and without consternation.

The evidence strongly supports the two-core hypothesis here (Table 3). Proposals in teaching and learning correlate at over .30 with increased controversy, as do proposals on school scheduling. On the other hand, proposals in the professional core were actually associated with a slight reduction in controversy. Since it seems unlikely that a proposal on teacher development actually reduces controversy, it appears that proposals in the professional core are more likely to be made when districts have avoided conflict.

Table 3: Correlation of Issue Controversy and Proposals

	Site-Based Management	Teacher Development	Curriculum	Student Evaluation	School Time/Day
Correlation	-.01	-.14	.33	.35	.33

Pearson's R.
n = 33.

Those respondents who indicated a proposal had been made in an issue area were asked, "What has been the most significant proposal made in the last three years?" This phrasing could have biased respondents in either of two directions. They could have named the most controversial and dramatic proposal to have been made, which would inflate the percentage of named proposals that were rejected. Or, respondents may have named the proposal which has had the biggest impact, which would bias them towards naming proposals that have been enacted. This tendency could be aggravated if respondents remember, or are only aware of, those proposals which are put into effect.[22]

Respondents reported almost no proposals as having been rejected. Rates of passage ranged from 87% to 96% in all policy areas, with student evaluation the only area beneath 90%. This is in contrast to the adversarial political model we see in state and national legislatures, where opposing factions fight on behalf of different policies. Whether this is an accurate depiction of policy making or an artifact of the interview instrument is unclear.

There are at least three possible explanations. One, mentioned above, is that respondents believe the "most significant" proposal to be the one that has had the most significant effect. A second, already mentioned, is that respondents were not aware of proposals which emerged but were not enacted. A third is that the policy making process in the schools really is much more one of administratively directed changes in practice than of policy conflict. This issue cannot be settled here, but awaits work with respondent replies on the role of state action, the reasons for policy inaction, on the workings of the policy making process.

However, the third explanation seems at least partially valid. For one thing, as discussed above, there are pressures pushing respondents to report policies that failed as well as those that passed. The policy making process in school systems appears to spin out fait accomplis, which are then supported by the board and the superintendent. One administrator explained,

"We haven't really changed policy in the last five years, but we have changed administrative practice. You need to differentiate between policy and administrative practice. We have been absent of policy voted upon by the board of education since I've been superintendent (5 years). They've been using policy that has been in place for some time. We don't really have an up to date policy manual."

A union president in a different district made a similar point, stating,

"It's hard to say who dominates policy making, because (city X) is a mish-mash where we all work on each other and out of that comes policy."

Most policies seem to be enacted administratively, at the behest of the state, or on the basis of unanimous or nearly-unanimous school board votes. Policy appears to generally be

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[22] There are problems with coding cities on the basis of whether a majority of respondents said action had been taken, particularly given the fact that all respondents are not talking about the same proposals.

made in private and then to be ratified in public. A union president explained how the school board worked.

"By law they (the school board) have to do all of it (their substantive business) in open meetings. In reality, I think that board members talk to each other. They discuss things in ones and twos, because more than two cannot meet in the same room to discuss anything dealing with board policy. Do they talk on the telephone? Sure. We're a little, incestuous town here. Everybody knows everybody else. We have the university here, they play a part. While the board has to make all decisions in the open as far as policy goes, I know they talk to each other in ones and twos. I talk to them, so I know they talk to each other."

In for a Dime, In for a Dollar: Bundled Issue Agendas

Do issues tend to move up and down the educational agenda together, or does increased attention to one policy area imply less attention to another? Research on agendas at the national level has implied that agendas only have a limited amount of room (Kingdon, 1984; Light 1991). The rise of one issue generally means the fall of another. However, because school systems deal with such a narrow slice of governance, it may be that the education agenda tends to rise and fall as a whole.

Table 4 displays the correlations among the mean attention level for each issue area across cities. A positive correlation means that issues gain or lose attention together, and a negative correlation that issues crowd each other off the agenda. No relationship would mean that either these two forces are acting at odds, or that policy makers are picking and choosing their spots.

Public attention to most issues correlates at .30 to .50. The strong positive correlations across all issues show that school issues tend to move up or down the local agenda en masse. Issue content appears irrelevant. School reform is either on the agenda or it is not. When it is, every policy on the menu is more likely to be considered. When it is not, all issues are given less attention. Whether this bundling is due to system leadership, environmental forces, or other local actors is unclear.

Table 4: Correlation of Public Attention Among Issue Areas

	Site-Based Management	Teacher Development	Curriculum	Student Evaluation
Teacher Development	.25			
Curriculum	.30	.40		
Student Evaluation	.38	.37	.42	
School Time/Day	.31	.12	.56	.44

Pearson's R.
n = 33.

The correlation in issue attention may or may not translate to a correlation in policy activity. Policy proposals take leadership, time, effort, and organization, while public attention requires little more than interest. Because school systems have limited resources of personnel and money, policy proposals are much less likely to correlate across issue areas than is public attention. A negative correlation among proposals implies that districts are limited in how many changes they can juggle at once, and a positive correlation that districts tackle issues together.

As expected, the correlation among proposals is much weaker than for public attention (Table 5). However, two interesting findings emerge. First, there is no relationship between activity on curriculum and student evaluation. This non-finding is significant because professional educators have repeatedly declared that changes in content and evaluation must be coordinated (Elmore 1991; Fullan 1991; Marsh and Odden 1991). Because teachers have an incentive to teach to the tests that a district uses, efforts to implement content changes are undermined if testing and curriculum are not coordinated. Having teachers teaching to the test, if the test does not match the actual curriculum, also casts doubt on test validity.

Second, districts making proposals on time or site-based management are slightly more likely to have proposals in each of the other policy areas (Pearson's R ranges from .07 to .30). Meanwhile, proposals for curriculum, student evaluation, and professional development change are very slightly, but negatively correlated. Structural changes in school management or the school schedule may be good table-setting changes which prepare districts for more change.[23]

Table 5: Correlation of Proposals Among Issue Areas

	Site-Based Management	Teacher Development	Curriculum	Student Evaluation
Teacher Development	.18			
Curriculum	.24	-.06		
Student Evaluation	.08	-.09	-.01	
School Time/Day	.30	.18	.17	.21

Pearson's R.
n = 33.

Given what is known about the tight linkage between proposals and action, it is not surprising that the correlations among action are very similar to those for proposals (Table 6). The structural changes again correlate positively with everything (Pearson's R .09 to .23), while evaluation, curriculum, and professional development have a very weak negative correlation.

[23] Or, they may tend to be parts of larger reform packages.

Table 6: Correlation of Action Among Issue Areas

	Site-Based Management	Teacher Development	Curriculum	Student Evaluation
Teacher Development	.23			
Curriculum	.14	-.15		
Student Evaluation	.09	-.01	.00	
School Time/Day	.14	.17	.18	.23

Pearson's R.
n = 33.

The correlations on attention, proposals, and action indicate that ideas tend to crowd the table when the educational agenda is heating up, but that proposing and enacting policy change does not get easier as more options are brought forth. On the other hand, unlike national and state politics, enacting changes does not get more difficult when more balls are being kept in the air. Although the table-setting reforms tend to accompany other reforms, changing policy in teaching and learning actually makes other changes slightly less likely.

Performance and Reform: Are Systems Responding to Community Dissatisfaction?

The most likely explanation for the bundling of attention across issues is that some districts need school reform more urgently than do others. A demand-driven model of school reform predicts more policy change in districts where the schools are viewed as performing poorly, as communities vote retrospectively and express dissatisfaction with the status quo by voting against school board incumbents and pressuring administrators (Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Key 1950). In school affairs, the geographical proximity of policy makers ought to make them more sensitive to community pressures. Given the visibility and public significance of the learning core, demand should have the greatest effect on curriculum and evaluation. The counter-hypothesis, long argued by public school critics, is that urban systems are bureaucratic enclaves divorced from public concerns, and that they will resist change, at least in the professional areas where the public is not deeply concerned (Chubb and Moe 1990).

Demand-driven models presume a two-step process: poor schools produce community dissatisfaction, and dissatisfaction translates into demands for improvement.[24] The crucial point here is that public dissatisfaction is not necessarily triggered by low-performing schools. Demands for reform are triggered by the public's *perception* that schools are low-performing. Actual school performance may be only loosely related to perceived performance for a number of reasons. First, measures of school performance are notoriously imprecise and subject to gimmickry. Second, this problem is complicated for the public by the difficulty schools have

[24] Because the five issues being studied represent the early 1990s professional consensus about how to improve schools, public demands ought to increase activity in the five issue areas.

conveying clear cues about system performance to the community. Most people have anecdotal or personal contact with the school system. Therefore, individual experiences can easily be projected onto the system as a whole (Lippman, 1954). The result of these factors may be that school reform is not very responsive to actual performance, but to perceived performance--which is driven by emotional considerations like media, catalyzing incidents, and entrepreneurial actors.

A second possibility, made more likely by a finding of a weak link between public sentiment and school policy making, is that school reform winds up being dominated by the professional educators who possess the knowledge base and interest to stay involved in making school policy (Olson 1965).

Because the theory of demand-driven reform implies that perception is more important than objective school performance, the variable measuring perceived school performance is a zero to ten variable compiled by asking each respondent to rate, "How does the local community views the performance of (the district's) schools, where zero means very poor and ten is excellent?"[25]

Before examining the data, there is a thorny problem in establishing prior causation between perceived performance and agenda activity which needs to be considered. The policy questions ask about the 1992-95 period, while the performance question refers to 1995, so it would appear that the policy data must be causally prior. However, research on public opinion has generally shown that public perceptions of government and institutions evolve slowly and are relatively stable (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Stimson 1991; Page and Shapiro 1992). Additionally, because perception is being measured by the once-removed process of getting respondent perceptions of the community's perception, responses are probably lagged to some degree.

Further complicating the issue is the possible argument that there may be a regression to the mean as districts viewed as poor three years ago have taken action to remedy the problem, which has now increased their perceived performance. Similarly, if well-regarded districts are complacent, their ratings may fall as the community becomes disenchanted with inaction.[26] As a preliminary approach, to avoid these tangled questions of causal direction, raw order correlations for policies and performance are examined. If the relationship proves strong, then the issue of causal priority will take on increased importance.[27]

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[25] It is possible that this is a inaccurate representation of community perception, and graduation statistics or test scores are actually more reflective of community sentiment. Those variables will be included in the full study.

[26] This analysis seems unconvincing on two counts. One, it presumes a district policy coherence which is not otherwise evident. Second, it presumes that public opinion (as perceived by elites) responds very quickly to district action (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Stimson 1991).

[27] It is vaguely possible that the conjunction of these trends has produced a regression to the mean which masks the process of demand-driven reform. That does not seem likely, given the research cited above on the gradual movement of public opinion.

Figure 6 About Here

The demand for reform appears generally constant (Figure 6). No one thinks their schools are especially bad, as the districts rated a mean score of 5.67, with a standard deviation of 1.29. Suburban Palo Alto, California, received the highest rating (8.4), while urban Philadelphia received the lowest (3.00).[28] Over 48% of cities were rated in the 20% of the spectrum ranging from 4 to 6. Only in seven out of 33 cities, or 24%, did respondents think communities viewed schools as less than a five. Notice that these ratings are for a random group of 33 generally urban school districts, the fate of which has been much lamented (Kozol 1991, National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). Yet the respondents believe that the community in 76% of them views the performance of the schools as above average.[29]

Figure 7 About Here

A brief look at the top two graphs in Figure 7 makes a pretty convincing case that education agendas are not demand driven. Perceived system performance is unrelated to public attention on the teaching and learning issues and to teacher development (Table 7). Low performance marginally increases public attention on SBM (Pearson's R -.32), but actually reduces attention to school scheduling.

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[28] Palo Alto and Philadelphia each proposed and enacted policy change in four issue areas. Neither proposed a change in evaluation. This coincidence will soon seem unremarkable.

[29] Given that we know people generally love their own but believe that other schools are troubled (Elam et al 1994), this is not particularly surprising. However, it is interesting for two reasons. First, this is evidence that the "my school is fine" patina extends to the district as a whole. Second, these are not polled responses, but reflect how influential system insiders and informed community leaders believe the community views the schools.

Table 7: Correlation of Perceived School Performance with Public Attention, Controversy, Policy Proposals, and Policy Action

Correlation of School Performance with:	Site-Based Management	Teacher Development	Curriculum	Student Evaluation	School Time/Day
Public Attention to Issue	-.32	.13	.08	-.09	.27
Controversy over Issue	-.44	-.35	-.04	-.36	.25
Proposals in Policy Area	-.10	.30	-.11	.08	-.08
Policies Enacted	-.23	.20	-.04	.11	-.01

Pearson's R.
n = 33.

On the other hand, the bottom two graphs in Figure 7 show that higher perceived performance was generally correlated with lower levels of controversy, particularly in the professional core (Table 8 displays Pearson's R of -.44 for SBM and -.35 for professional development). This is unsurprising. Controversy probably reduces perceived school performance, and systems which are thought to be doing well doubtless have a freer hand to smooth issues over in private.

Figure 8 About Here

The results on policy proposals and action show pretty conclusively that systems viewed as faring poorly are no more likely to aggressively pursue reform than are those thought to be doing well. Figure 8 displays the relationship of school performance to policy proposals in a graph that has been jittered, in order to make the observations more clear. Weaker perceived performance did not correlate substantially with increased policy activity in any issue area. Weaker school performance correlated slightly (-.23) with an increase in enacting SBM policy, but it correlated just as strongly with reduced action on professional development (.20).[30]

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[30] To be sure that the effect of perceived performance was as minimal as it looks, simple univariate models were run which used perceived performance to explain policies proposed and action taken. These models presume that performance was causally prior. The two models used were:

issue proposal = b1(school performance) + b2(error term)

issue action = b1(school performance) + b2(error term)

A demand-driven model does not explain the mystery of why public attention is bundled or the positive correlations of the table-setting reforms. Further, demand did not affect individual issues in the way the two-core hypothesis predicted. Perceived school performance does not appear to affect the educational agenda or school reform efforts.

Perhaps this should not be terribly surprising. After all, studies have generally shown that people have only a vague understanding of specific policy proposals (Converse et al 1960; Popkin 1994; Stimson 1991). Further, mere dissatisfaction does not necessarily produce action. Agitating for change incurs costs that people may not be motivated enough to bear (Downs 1957). An alternative explanation is that communities may agitate for change but be thwarted by behavioral routines (Peterson 1976; Allison 1969), institutional sclerosis (Dye 1990; Olson 1982), overgrown bureaucracies (Chubb and Moe 1990), or a lack of the resources needed for change in the districts where need is greatest (Kozol, 1991).

In Pursuit of A Theory

Structural educational reform in the early 1990s appears to be characterized by four traits. First, there are clear differences in the attention and rate of action across the five issue areas, with site-based management dominating the public agenda and school scheduling lagging behind. Second, the public attention paid to school reforms tends to pick up in all issue areas or none of them, but there is no similar correlation in the proposing of policy. Third, demand for reform, as measured by perceived school performance, does not affect policy making. Finally, the two-core analysis of schools appears useful in explaining the degree of variance in public attention and how much controversy an issue or a proposal will generate, but not in predicting levels of activity or which issues bundle together. Student-oriented reforms were associated with much more controversy than are professional-oriented reforms. The patterns here appear to show that education reform agendas and policy making are systematically organized by something besides consumer satisfaction. Understanding the force or forces responsible should tell us a great deal about the constraints policy makers face in reforming schools, and, more generally, about how public agendas are constructed and public policy is made.

School performance proved statistically insignificant at $p < .05$ for all issues in both models.

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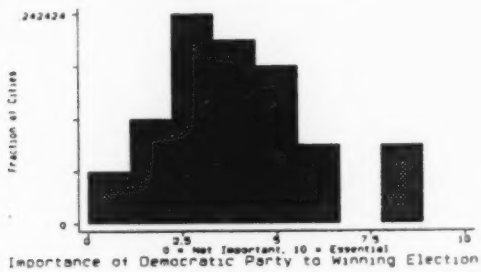
Figure 1: Political Party Influence in School Board Elections
Mean Rating Across 33 Cities



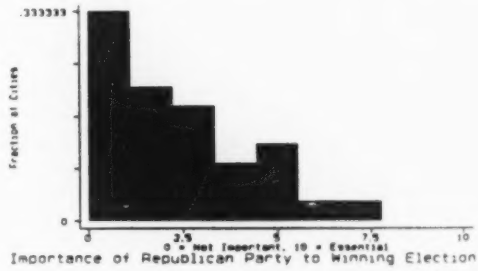
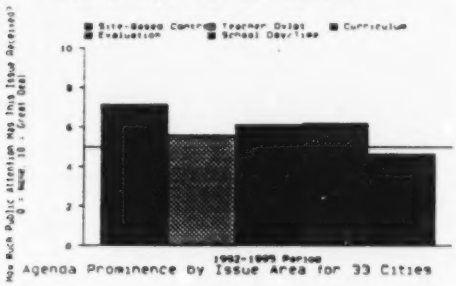
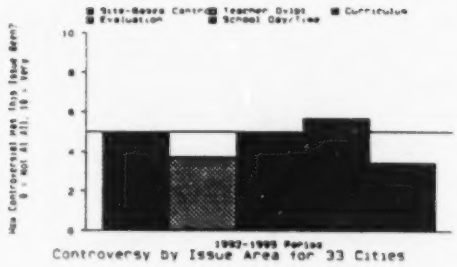


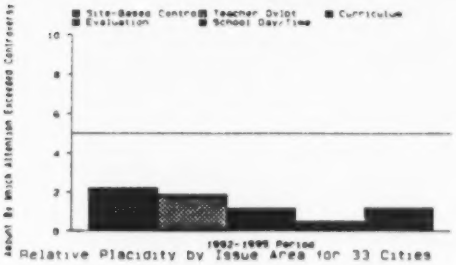
Figure 2: Agenda Prominence for Five School Reforms, 1992-95
Mean Rating Across 33 Cities



Agenda Prominence by Issue Area for 33 Cities



Controversy by Issue Area for 33 Cities



Relative Placidity by Issue Area for 33 Cities

Figure 3: Variation in Agenda Prominence of School Reforms, 1992-95
Mean for Each of 33 Cities is Graphed as One Observation

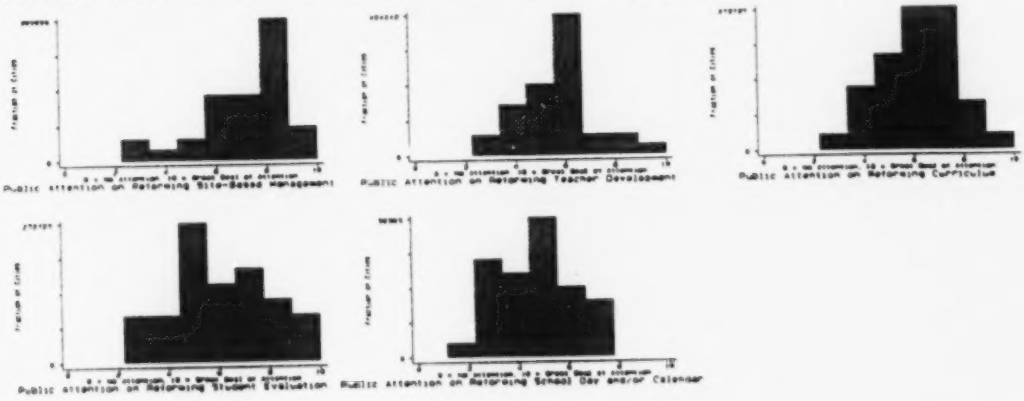
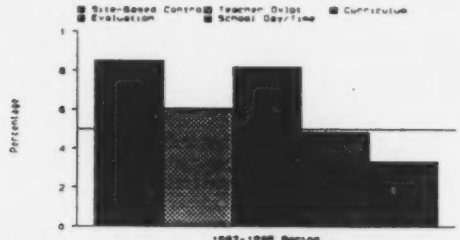
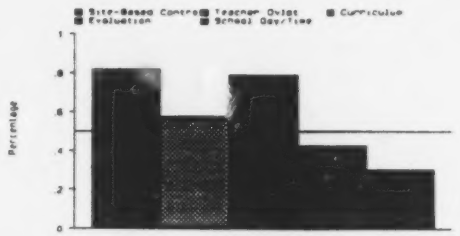


Figure 4: Proposals and Action Across Five Issues Areas, 1992-1995
Percentage of Activity Across 33 Cities

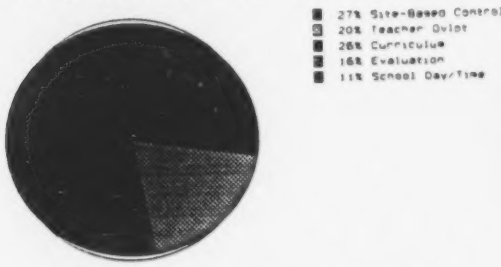


Percentage of 33 Cities Making Proposals by Issue Area

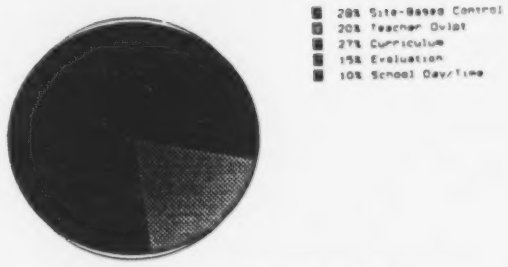


Percentage of 33 Cities Enacting Policies by Issue Area

Figure 5: Breakdown of Activity By Issue Areas
For 33 Districts, 1992-95



Percentage of All Policies Proposed



Percentage of All Policies Enacted

Figure 6: Perceived School Performance, 1992-95
Mean Rating for Each of 33 Districts

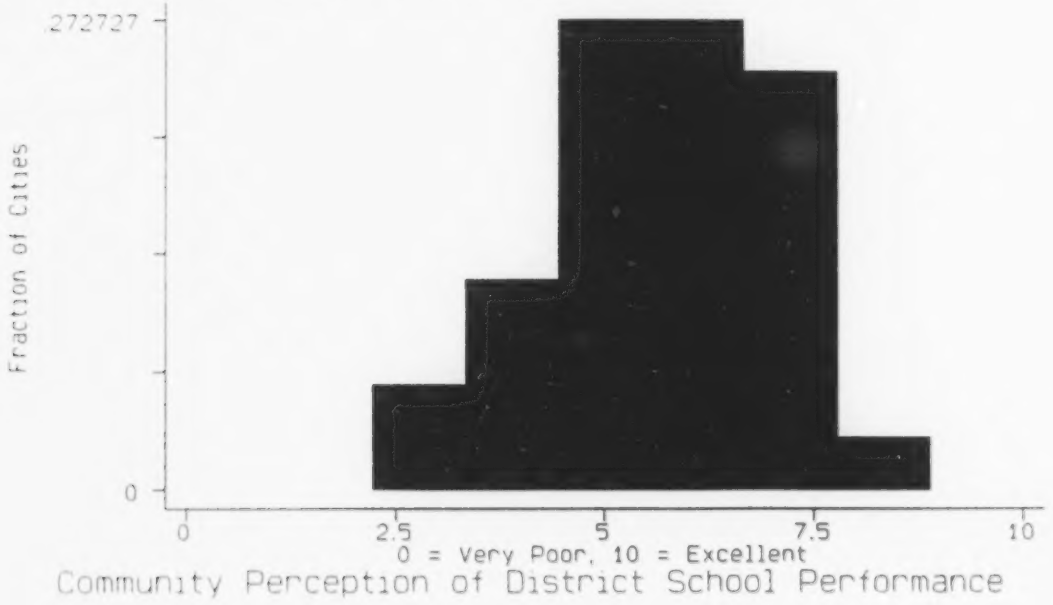
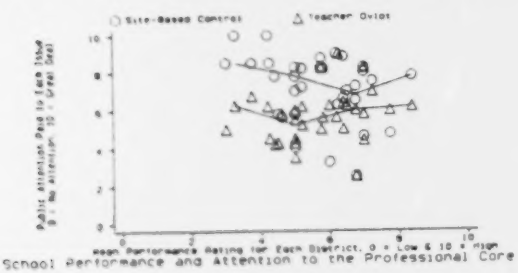
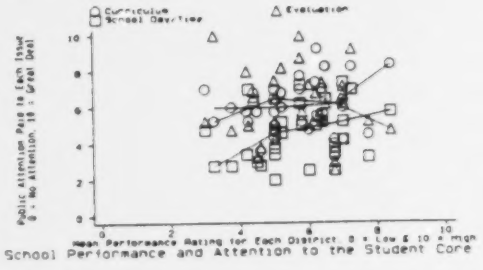
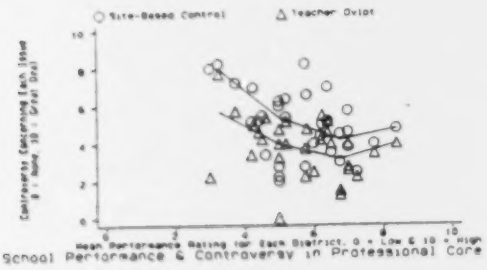


Figure 7: School Performance and Agenda Prominence
Mean Performance Rating and the Reform Agenda in 33 Districts, 1992-95


Site-Based Control
Teacher Quiet
Public Attention Paid to Each Issue
0 = No Attention, 10 = Great Deal
Mean Performance Rating for Each District, 0 = Low & 10 = High
School Performance and Attention to the Professional Core


Curriculum
School Day/Time
Evaluation
Public Attention Paid to Each Issue
0 = No Attention, 10 = Great Deal
Mean Performance Rating for Each District, 0 = Low & 10 = High
School Performance and Attention to the Student Core


Site-Based Control
Teacher Quiet
Controversy Concerning Each Issue
0 = None, 10 = Great Deal
Mean Performance Rating for Each District, 0 = Low & 10 = High
School Performance & Controversy in Professional Core

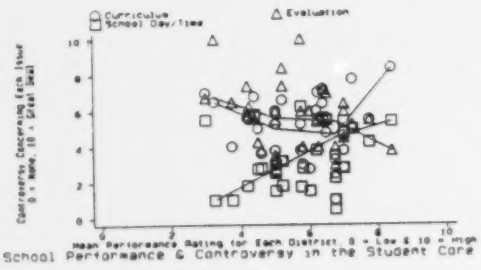
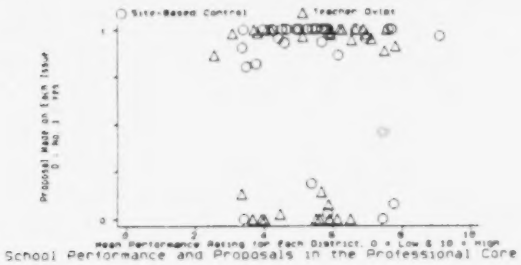
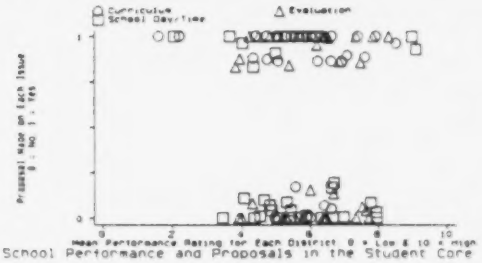

Curriculum
School Day/Time
Evaluation
Controversy Concerning Each Issue
0 = None, 10 = Great Deal
Mean Performance Rating for Each District, 0 = Low & 10 = High
School Performance & Controversy in the Student Core

Figure 8: School Performance and Proposed Policy Change
Mean Performance Rating and Policy Change in 33 Districts, 1992-95



School Performance and Proposals in the Professional Core



School Performance and Proposals in the Student Core